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The Banipal Trust for Arab Literature

P O B O X 22300 LONDON W13 8ZQ UK
Tel: 00 44 (0) 20 8568 9747 info@banipaltrust.org.uk www.banipaltrust.org.uk

The **Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation** has been awarded to Humphrey Davies, for his translation of Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun*, published in the UK by Harvill Secker and in the USA by Archipelago Press.

The judges, author Moris Farhi, literary journalist Maya Jaggi and literary translator from Arabic and academic Roger Allen unanimously chose this work from 11 entries.

Speaking for the judges **Maya Jaggi** said: "The judges were unanimous in awarding the inaugural Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation to Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun* (Harvill Secker), translated by Humphrey Davies. Inspired by refugees' accounts of the Palestinian expulsion of 1948 and its lingering aftermath, Khoury's ambitious and richly crafted novel is an epic retelling of myriad individual stories through the central narrative of Khaleel, a doctor tending a comatose former Palestinian fighter in a refugee camp's makeshift hospital on the outskirts of Beirut. Tracing the meshed histories of Lebanon and Palestine from the 1930s to the 1990s, and the multiple crossings of a once-porous border with the state of Israel, it subtly questions the nature of memory and history, literature and imagination, heroism and defeat. The novel is a monumental achievement, whose translation by Humphrey Davies brilliantly captures the nuances and style of the original.

"The runner-up is Mohamed El-Bisatie's *Clamor of the Lake* (American University in Cairo Press), translated by Hala Halim. Set in a landscape in flux, where lake meets sea, this innovative novel is a haunting and tender evocation of place and the passing of time through the linked tales of humble lake dwellers, whether fishermen, traders or treasure-hunting beachcombers. Hala Halim's translation superbly renders the original's lyricism and fluidity.

"Also highly commended was Edwar Al-Kharat's *Stones of Bobello* (Saqi), translated by Paul Starkey."

After being told of his award, **Humphrey Davies** said: "The initial draft of Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun* took me some eight weeks of full-time work during the summer of 2004, part of it in Alexandria. By good luck, the author was in Alexandria briefly during the same period and he and I spent one nine-hour session reviewing my queries. Such contact with the author is, I believe, extremely important; to date I have been fortunate enough to be able to consult almost all the living authors whose works I have translated (I have questions for the dead too, when I meet them).

"Winning the Banipal Prize (my first, though the same work received financial support from English PEN's competitive Writers in Translation programme) represents for me, primarily,

recognition of the novel itself. *The Gate of the Sun* is a work of extraordinary strength that non-Arabic readers need to have available. I am doubly happy that, in translating it, I have helped to put before the reader of English so compelling an account of the dispossession of the Palestinians.”

Moris Farhi commented: “What impressed me most was the natural poetry in the prose. This – the innate poetry bursting out from even prose writers – is, I think, is one of the great strengths of Arabic language and literature. Needless to say, to convey such delicate poetry to an English readership is also a great achievement by the translators. Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun*, which the judges unanimously declared the winner of the prize, is a haunting book on the Palestinian passion. I believe it also pays homage, through certain repetitious passages, to the oral tradition of story-telling that is so popular in the Middle East.”

Roger Allen noted that although the judging were made easier by the wide difference in the quality of the literature of the works submitted, it was still difficult to choose between the best three or four. *Gate of the Sun*, he added, was such an outstanding work that almost anything else was going to have a problem – “assuming, of course, that the translation itself is good. And in this case, it’s excellent.”

The Prize was set up by *Banipal*, the magazine of modern Arab literature in English translation, and the Banipal Trust for Arab Literature, founded in 2004 to support the publication of Arab authors in English translation and the production of live literature events in the UK with Arab authors. It is administered by the UK’s Society of Authors and the Translators Association. The prize of £2000 to the translator celebrates the translation and publishing of contemporary Arab authors, entries restricted to works originally published up to thirty-five years prior to their entry for the prize. It is the first prize specifically for a published work of literary translation from Arabic in the English-speaking world. The prize is wholly sponsored during its first year by Mohammed Al-Sowaidi, the Secretary-General of the Cultural Foundation of Abu Dhabi, himself an arts patron and publisher, and keenly interested in developing cultural and literary dialogue between the Arab world and the West.

Humphrey Davies studied Arabic at Cambridge University, achieving a First, and at the American University in Cairo. He completed his PhD at the University of California, Berkeley. He has worked in publishing in the Middle East and, in Cairo, on the the Hinds-Badawi *Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic*, later spending several years working for non-governmental community development and funding organizations, before turning to literary translation. He translated an early Naguib Mahfouz novel (*Thebes at War*, 2003) for the American University in Cairo Press, and has continued translating for them, with Alaa Al-Aswany’s *The Yacoubian Building* (2004, a best-seller and also an entry to the Banipal Prize), Ahmed Alaidy’s *Being Abbas el Abd* (September 2006), and Gamal al-Ghitani’s *Pyramid Texts* (forthcoming 2006 or 2007). He stated: “Without the dedication of the AUC Press to the translation of modern Arabic fiction into English my life as a translator would be almost unimaginable, although Banipal magazine and wordswithoutborders have continued to provide a platform for shorter translations.”

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